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@ Don Jindra,

I was not discussing how conscious beings come to know about meaning. We all agree that in this world there are things with meaning (say, symbols, algorithms, the gospel according to John) and we agree that there are ways by which we know that meaning.

I tried to respond to a question you had asked, namely *<i>“Why can [meaning] not be something as simple as unconscious interpretation of byte streams?”</i>*. I took it this was an ontological question, namely whether meaning may exist at the absence of consciousness. I proceeded to analyze this question in the context of the zombie world and argued that it makes no sense to talk about meaning existing in that world (implying that it is therefore unreasonable to believe that meaning exists in that world). And that's I think what Searle means when (to use Feser's wording) he says that computation is observer-relative, and thus not a natural kind (and therefore, finally, computation is unavailable as a scientific explanation). If one holds that computation necessarily has some meaning, and also agrees with my argument, then one will agree with Searle that computation is not a natural kind.

Searle's argument is different and depends on the premisses *<i>“Computation requires symbols”</i>* and *<i>“Symbols require interpretation by a [conscious] observer”</i>*. These premisses have the disadvantage that they depend on the definition (and are thus open to the redefinition) of the concepts of “computation” and “symbol”. I find that philosophical discourse that boils down to people creatively pulling at definitions is not useful. My argument follows a different path, the path of implication – a *reductio ad absurdum* if you will. I start by assuming that in a world identical to ours as far as propositions about physical facts goes but in which no consciousness exist, meaning does exist. Then try to show that this assumption leads to absurdities that defeat the meaning of the concept of meaning. In this way I try to show that it makes no sense to speak of meaning existing in a world without consciousness, and (as long as one holds that computation entails meaning) it makes no sense to speak of computation existing in a world without consciousness, just as Searle has it.

My argument is not totally impervious to the stupid concept-redefinition game, for example one might claim that every complex state of affairs (including the swirling of milk in my coffee) might potentially carry a deep meaning. Now it is easier (and perhaps more natural) to play with the meaning of concepts like “symbol” than to play with the meaning of “meaning” itself, a concept that is deeply rooted in our experience of reasoning. But this does not say much. The meaning of “freedom” has deep roots in our experience of being, and this has not stopped philosophers (up to the current day) to insist that freedom may be consistent with determinism, as if it makes sense to say that a cuckoo clock has the freedom to strike or not strike the hour, or a chess playing computer has the freedom to choose its next move. At this point discussion often moves to the point of diminishing returns, and the wiser choice is to simply state one's one meaning of the concepts one uses and be done with it – people are free to coin as many concepts they like and we can freely produce different identifiers for each one of them. The wise philosopher uses the folk meaning of concepts, and if that concept is not the one required for her argument she simply coins a new world defined with by the required concept. Coming back to our discussion, given the folk meaning of “meaning”, which is not consisting of milk swirling in coffee carrying any, and given that computation does have meaning, Searly and I argue by different paths that computation is observer-relative and thus not of a natural kind.

Now whether “meaning is thrust upon us” or else is the result of conscious thought or insight is a different matter. What Searle and Feser appear to be more interested with is whether observer-relative computation can be available for scientific explanations. For discussion's sake let us assume that computation is indeed observer-relative. What does it follow for the business of scientific

explanations?

"Scientific explanation" is a vague concept. One is used to and expects for science to give us "aha" moments, simply because this is one of the pleasures of our intellectual life. So when we say "Einstein's general relativity explained the strange orbit of Mercury" we often mean that pleasurable psychological state. As far as the practical use of the physical sciences is concerned (the power to predict events, to build machines, and so on) the only thing that matters when one speaks of "explanation" is the discovery of mathematical patterns present within physical phenomena. As simple and as concrete as that. Find a simple mathematical structure which entails both the mathematical structure of quantum mechanics and of general relativity and you'll get the Nobel prize in physics.

Now in the context of doing science computation is such a pattern. Intelligent behavior by organisms is also such a pattern. Therefore, I say, the concept of computation that identifies the first kind of pattern, can be used in science as a means for explaining the second. Notwithstanding the fact that the concept of computation when used ontologically appear to refer to something that is observer-relative and therefore not of a natural kind. After all the actual business of doing physical science is metaphysically neutral, as evidenced by the fact that very confident theists and very confident naturalists can all be very good scientists. It is important to always keep in mind both the fundamental difference between physics and metaphysics, but also relationship between the two:

Among all the possible metaphysics (i.e. descriptions of actual reality) there are many which are consistent with the grand total of physical phenomena we know about and will probably ever know about, and that's one small part of why doing metaphysics is difficult. But there are also many possible metaphysics which are not consistent with the grand total of physical phenomena. For example any metaphysics, that does not entail conscious observers is not; any metaphysics which does not entail change, and so on. Thus scientific discoveries can falsify metaphysical theories. The practical implications for philosophy are minor, since any metaphysical theory worth its salt will be consistent with all physical phenomena, or will be at least naturally amenable to be made consistent if some unexpected deep pattern is discovered. Actual examples would be quantum mechanics which falsified all simple deterministic metaphysical theories, as well as all local theories. A strong case can be made that modern cosmology has falsified any metaphysics that entails an infinite past. So, I think it is fair to say, physical science has been useful to the metaphysician. Also the rather interesting meta-philosophical argument can be made that modern scientific discoveries have been more kind (or fit more naturally) with theistic than with naturalistic metaphysics – since determinism, locality, and infinite past were long considered the "natural" views on naturalism whereas non-determinism (given freedom of the will), non-locality (given the attributes of God), and non-infinite past (given creation) were considered the natural views on theism. Naturalism found its way around the unfortunate scientific discoveries. Should future scientific discoveries point towards an infinite past I am sure theistic philosophers would find a way around the problem too, as they did when at the birth of the scientific age science appeared to point towards a deterministic reality. As things stand today I find scientific explanations have been rather kind with pre-scientific theistic notions and rather unkind with pre-scientific naturalistic notions.

My criticism of Searle's argument then is this: He is right to point out that computation is observer-relative and thus not a natural kind - in a world without consciousness it makes no sense to speak of computation. But this is a truth in the context of metaphysics, which does not necessarily carry over to the context of physics. In the context of physics (aka of the physical sciences) computation is a well understood pattern (see the respective mathematical theory), and thus can very well be used for whatever scientific endeavor one likes. Including the physics of intelligent behavior.

My criticism of Feser's argument in the OP is similar: Since I don't understand A-T metaphysics I take his word that computation is of a natural kind in an A-T reality. But this is by itself irrelevant to the question of whether the concept of computation can or cannot be used in the context of doing physics.

Let me explain what I mean by an example: On theism justice is a fundamental part of reality, and is therefore of a natural kind. Justice is part of the very fabric of reality. But this is by itself irrelevant to the question of whether the concept of justice can or cannot be used in the context of doing physics. Most theists would agree that it cannot be used.

I find it useful to think about physics and metaphysics employing the following image: The set of physical phenomena, and thus what grounds all the truths of the physical sciences is plane, a two-dimensional plane which is unknown to us in all its extent but is known to us immediately and with certainty. Reality, which necessarily produces the plane of physics, as it produces the total of the human condition, is a three-dimensional body. That substantial body "projects" all that is known to us in the physical plane of the human condition as well as whatever else there may be in the human condition. I am of course describing Plato's cave, which I suggest is a constant in metaphysics (we find it for example in Kant's language about phenomena and noumena). Whatever the details it seems clear to me that the fundamental ontological difference between phenomena as known to us and actual reality defines which epistemologies for doing metaphysics is reasonable and which aren't.

So I think that Searle and Feser commit a similar epistemological error. It is evident that a speculated fact about the body of reality cannot be such as to contradict a known fact about the physical plane (or more generally about the phenomenal plane) we have direct access to, and this is how scientific discoveries may falsify metaphysical theories. Now Searle and Feser go the other way around: After arguing about a fact about the body of reality they want to project that fact onto the phenomenal plane, and in particular to the physical plane and thus to science. That's ok as it goes, but requires an additional argument, since from property X holds in the metaphysical body it does not necessarily follow that property X holds on the phenomenal plane too. For example, from the fact that metaphysical reality changes does not necessarily follow that phenomenal reality must also change (puppeteers in a shadow theater may move their puppets in a way that their shadows stay still). Similarly from the fact that metaphysical reality is non-deterministic does not necessarily follow that phenomenal reality cannot be deterministic. Similarly from the fact that methodological naturalism utterly fails as a theory of metaphysical reality it does not necessarily follow that methodological naturalism utterly fails for phenomenal reality and in particular for physical reality. Similarly (and I think ominously for Feser's case) from the fact that there are final causes in metaphysical reality it does not necessarily follow that there are final causes in phenomenal reality and in particular in physical reality. (Actually given final causes in metaphysical reality all combinations are possible, as for example that physical reality has no final causes but non-physical phenomenal reality has them.) Observe that the opposite is not true, so if change, or indeterminism, or final causes do exist in phenomenal reality then they must also exist in metaphysical reality. (A point of caution: When above I speak of "physical reality" I mean the actual and known physical reality we observe around us and the physical sciences study; not how philosophical naturalists imagine metaphysical reality actually is.)

Luckily for philosophers, science is an ongoing and very successful business, which therefore provides a lot of evidence for philosophers. So given the fact that scientists have advanced so much without using the concept of final cause pretty much proves that the concept of final cause is not required by the physical sciences. Given the fact that scientists find it useful to use what they know about computation when they analyze the phenomena related to intelligence pretty much proves that it is useful to use the concept of computation in a scientific explanation.